



Colloquium Series: Welfare versus Empowerment? Governmentality in the ICDS and Mahila Samakhya Programs

Speaker:

Akhil Gupta, Department of Anthropology and Director, Center for India and South Asia,
University of California, Los Angeles

Date / Time:

August 2, 2012 - 4:00pm - 5:45pm

Venue:

10th Floor, Auditorium, Pixel A, APU

Abstract:

This talk compares two very different types of programs aimed at poor women to investigate the links between governmentality and neoliberalism. The speaker contrasts the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program, in some ways a classic welfare scheme that aimed to deliver tangible benefits to poor women and vulnerable children, with the Mahila Samakhya program, whose goal was to empower women to improve their own life situations but not to deliver anything to them by way of goods and services. Both programs relied on their rural clients to provide “altruistic” labor for the betterment of their selves and communities; in addition, Mahila Samakhya was dependent on a small staff of non-governmental employees to do empowerment work. Moreover, both programs actively recruited indigent women (separated, widowed, abandoned, divorced, or never married) who were head of households to be workers. Finally, both programs had some similar effects that were unintended, in that they brought women into state and transnational projects of governmentality through enumeration and classification and through their recruitment as workers and targets of these programs. These similarities made the contrasts between the two programs even sharper.

The chief contrast that the speaker wishes to highlight here is that these programs were the product of two different periods in the history of India’s post-Independence development, with their respectively divergent philosophies. ICDS had the goal of reducing population growth rates and speeding up the nation’s development; it aimed to deliver entitlements to a group of recipients—poor women and children—who had hitherto been ignored by the biases built into (implicitly androcentric) development interventions. Mahila Samakhya, while relying on a philosophy of community development and radical social change, was much more skeptical of

the utility of delivering entitlements, and was built instead around the idea that poor women's own agency had to be mobilized through empowerment to make long-lasting change. Thus, the difference between ICDS and Mahila Samakhya lay not only in the fact that ICDS had its genesis in a period when the model of the sovereign national state was paramount, and Mahila Samakhya was launched in a period when neo-liberalism was the dominant global ideology, but also in that the two programs embodied correspondingly different ideas in their basic design, structure, strategies, and goals.

A Note on the Speaker:

Akhil Gupta is Professor, Department of Anthropology and Director, Center for India and South Asia (CISA), University of California, Los Angeles. His research interests include Ethnography of information technology, the state and development, anthropology of food, environmental anthropology, space and place, and history of anthropology. Some of his publications include *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India*. Duke Univ. Press (2012), *The Indian State After Liberalization*, (edited with K. Sivaramakrishnan), Routledge (2010), *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader* (edited with Aradhana Sharma), Blackwell (2006), *Caste and Outcast* (edited with Gordon Chang and Purnima Mankekar), Stanford Univ. Press (2002), *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India*, Duke University Press (1998), *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology* (edited with James Ferguson), Duke University Press (1997) *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science* (edited with James Ferguson), Univ. of California Press (1997).